When Looking Within IS NOT ENOUGH

How school districts act on a recognized need for external expertise

BY BETH BOATRIGHT AND CHRYSAN GALLUCCI

The political climate's demand for powerful, equitable public schooling has upped the ante for what educators are expected to do to improve achievement for today's students. This is especially pertinent in the case of high-poverty schools targeted for ambitious improvements. Given the crevasse between test scores of poorer and wealthier students, there is a long way to go.

Researchers, policymakers and practitioners agree that improving the content and delivery of teachers' professional development is essential to improving student achievement. But innovative solutions do not magically appear out of the mental soup of what educators already know about instruction and its improvement. Rather, teachers, principals and district administrators must interact with new ideas and observe what is possible before they can imagine putting them to use in their daily practice.

While school districts are responsible for providing professional development opportunities for their teachers, their capacity to sustain high standards for teaching and learning often is limited by insufficient expertise and resources. Consequently, most professional development opportunities for teachers involve traditional workshops and other formalized, short-term formats that rarely influence classroom practice in meaningful ways.

In contrast, high-quality professional development opportunities focus on more than the accumulation of discrete technical skills or deeper knowledge of a content area. According to Judith Warren Little, a professor at the University of California's Graduate School of Education, teachers are more likely to engage intellectually, socially and emotionally with ideas, materials and their colleagues when professional development accounts for teachers' experiences and work contexts; when it considers teachers as not just consumers of knowledge, but also as practitioners engaged actively in inquiry; and when it aims for professional growth through colleagueship.

Need for Expertise

Given limited internal capacity to construct dynamic professional learning opportunities, school districts increasingly are seeking partnerships outside the system. External coaching organizations are emerging as promising partners, offering a potential source of expertise that can augment what districts and schools might otherwise do to shape teachers' knowledge, skills and beliefs about content and their students as learners.

For example, the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington works with school districts to provide a variety of professional development opportunities across the system, targeting central-office leaders, school principals, content coaches and classroom teachers. The organization approaches its district partners with a flexible structure that enables it to meet the needs of individual districts and leaders.

The literature on third-party support for district instructional reform confirms that these providers can be a source of assistance, knowledge and potential guidance for teaching and learning about instructional improvement. Such groups, variously referred to as "intermediaries," "reform support organizations" and "external change agents," have been major players in districtwide instructional reform in recent years.

Some, operating from a philanthropic base, such as the Panasonic Foundation's systemic change efforts or the Annenberg Challenge initiatives, bring resources and a well-developed agenda to schools and school districts, along with varying degrees of technical assistance.

Others, which reside in universities or regional educational service centers, are more likely to offer fee-based assistance aimed at capacity-building and professional development. Still others are nonprofit entities providing districts comprehensive support for reform on a fee-for-service basis, among them, First Things First and the Busara Group. Corporate groups like the Merck Institute for Science Education provide yet another form of external support.

Investing in Strength

However, outside expertise is costly and district resources are scarce, so who gets the privilege of spending time with external coaching organizations?

One high school principal said, "I think it's hard to say this, but one thing we've agreed to is that right now we're not supporting struggling teachers. … That is part of the theory of action. The notion is that we're 'going with our goers.'"

The phrase "go with the goers" describes a strategy of investing resources in people who are willing to embrace change and new learning. The belief is that, over time, these goers will share their knowledge and skills with colleagues and create initial momentum and buzz for instructional reform. Once initial capacity is built in a core group of goers, leaders can draw on and leverage those individuals toward an increasingly wider teacher audience each year.

And yet, the strategy of going with the goers as a quick-start means building long-term capacity for many teachers, and potentially students, is delayed during the initial phases. This approach is potentially problematic in a climate of high-pressure accountability. It also raises questions about equitable distribution of resources in the short term. The need to achieve better student learning outcomes quickly versus the desire to build deep instructional expertise within the district is a source of ongoing tension for district and school leaders.

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By its very nature, going with the goers assumes a long time frame. Yet only so much money is available to buy external expertise each year. District and school leaders we work with frequently ask themselves, "If we invest in people who are willing and able to jump into this new learning, who are we leaving behind and what are the consequences of that decision?"

Districts are finding that the goers are supporting other teachers as they build their own capacity. Because of positive results they see emerging from their previous investments, these school districts continue to stay the course by supporting their goers.

A Case in Point

Located 15 miles south of Seattle, the Highline School District serves an impoverished, linguistically diverse population of students when compared to its Puget Sound neighbors. In 2003, fewer than 35 percent of 10th-grade students were performing at grade level in math and only 40 percent of high school students graduated within four years. Recognizing a need for help, the superintendent (at the time) joined forces with the Center for Educational Leadership.

The center maintains that the achievement gap will be eliminated only when the quality of instruction improves and that instruction will improve at scale only when leaders better understand what powerful instruction looks like. This requires districts guide professional development, target and align resources around instructional improvement, and engage in ongoing problem solving and long-range capacity building.

Literacy expert Katherine Casey, author of *Literacy Coaching: The Essentials* and a former teacher in New York Community School District 2, has run monthly seminars on leadership for instructional improvement in several partner districts, including Highline. Her efforts are multilayered. She works with site leadership teams to research and analyze student performance in order to plan and implement effective professional development. She coaches alongside the district's staff developers to improve teacher practice and student achievement, and she models exemplary teaching in all components of balanced literacy.

Casey describes her philosophy behind instructional coaching as being able to help practitioners "see something different from what they've seen before." As a coach, she says, "We can give people opportunities to see what they haven't seen and then actually teach them the skills they need to achieve their goals."

Highline's partnership with the Center for Educational Leadership has grown over the years. The center collaborates with Highline personnel regarding instructional leadership and improved teaching and learning in specific settings, including professional development seminars, district-level planning meetings, external visits to other districts, demonstration sites (such as lab classrooms and summer school sessions), school-level planning meetings and job-embedded coaching for teachers, principals and central-office administrators.

The center provides expertise regarding instructional leadership and pedagogical content knowledge, but the partnership involves an ongoing process of negotiation with district and building leaders. The center has a general theory of action about how to achieve change and brought specific ideas about leadership and instruction, but does not bring specific scripts or roadmaps for district success.

Most notably, the professional learning opportunities constructed by Highline's partnership are grounded in content expertise in educators' own work settings. Content expertise, or knowing enough content in a subject matter to identify, navigate and predict where each student will encounter difficulty, was often what made it possible for teachers to address their own struggling students' learning needs.

For example, a new 11th-grade language arts teacher wanted students to own their own ideas but didn't know

how to accomplish this goal. With the help of a center consultant, a veteran literacy educator who had worked with teachers, principals and district leaders for over 15 years, the newcomer increased her expectations about what her students were capable of doing.

Growth Through Practice

Leaders in other districts, such as Marysville in Washington and Norwalk-La Mirada in California, are arriving at similar conclusions.

The Marysville School District initiated what it called "studio days" that built pedagogical content knowledge of teachers, principals and district leaders into capacity for improving instruction systemwide. Here, the studio model invites teachers to observe colleagues from other classrooms model lessons and engage with a consultant.

The studio teacher's classroom is a site for learning. A studio teacher co-teaches with a consultant in a real classroom setting, while other teachers observe and later debrief with the consultant and studio teacher. The expectation is that these teachers will try techniques they learned.

As in a medical model, these teachers participate in professional development by literally being in residence in another classroom for a short time. One Marysville studio teacher learned how to increase middle school students' ownership over their writing by tapping into what most interested them. With the assistance of an external consultant and the studio residency structure, the studio teacher learned instructional techniques likely to produce better student outcomes. Further, he was able to process his learning in a public sphere for others to benefit.

In California, the Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District initiated something it labeled "principal cadres" to provide site administrators with a network of peers for constructive support and critique. During these half-day meetings, a consultant from the center and roughly five principals within the same set of feeder schools observe classroom teaching, then debrief as a group.

On one occasion, a cadre of elementary principals focused on a common problem of their practice — how to give teachers honest, constructive feedback. After observing a 5th-grade class, the principals and a consultant with the Center for Educational Leadership readied the host principal for his feedback session with the 5th-grade teacher.

The consultant put it this way: "We want to focus on the strengths of the lesson and what might be a leverage point to make the teacher more effective in her instruction." As the principals commented on the strengths and potential areas for support, she pressed further by asking the group, "What would we want the teacher to leave with today?" and later asked the host principal, "So if that's the case, what is it you want her to do?" and finally, "So what will you ask her?"

The consultant and the principals remained as the host principal debriefed the lesson with the classroom teacher. After the teacher left, he sighed, "I'm exhausted!" Toward the end of the principal cadre meeting, the consultant restated the two general objectives of the teacher conference — to learn more about the teacher's thinking and to move the practice of the teacher. "It takes a lot of practice," she stated. One principal added, "It takes a lot of honesty. We can't grow if we don't practice."

Systems of Support

While highly varied, these external efforts are all focused on the systemic improvement of schooling, often with a focus on the quality of teaching and student learning. As such, they recognized that districts they work with need extensive help creating and maintaining systems of support for instructional improvement. External organizations accomplish this by:

- Offering districts access to ideas about reform and specific knowledge resources (including materials);
- Creating relationships with districts over time, through which the knowledge resources generally are delivered through expert staff or consultants;
- Operating from a stated or implied theory of action that rests on a vision of good instruction and the means to reach it in a complex system;
- Intervening in, even disrupting, the status quo affairs of the district and, by doing so, creating occasions for change; and
- Providing legitimacy and a stable reference point for reform ideas that might otherwise get lost in the turbulent affairs of a complex school district.

And, while reports of such partnerships show mixed results in sustainability and actual changes at the classroom level, there is widespread dependence on them to help districts make enduring changes in teaching, learning and leadership in support of it. We are beginning to see some promising examples. ■

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